

Forum

TOWARDS A PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

Adya Rangacharya

After almost forty years of meddling with drama and dramatic activities my one definite achievement has been to know and understand myself as a 'pess-optimist'. Forty years intensive and extensive experience should give one the authority of at least coining a word which not only describes me but the problem and future of Indian Drama as I see it. Since political Independence I have read about a score of seminars and participated in a dozen where everytime new ideas have been bandied about and the old situation allowed to continue. Governments, academies, individual institutions, Five Year Plans and publicity-motives have taken steps to encourage Drama, sponsor festivals, organize competitions and award prizes. For one like myself who contributed to, organized and spread dramatic activities long before all these carrots were dangled the present situation should have been exhilarating but for the fact that for all the smoke there is no fire to be seen, not even a spark. At the same time a new awareness can be observed in the few—very few—honest efforts and experiments to find modern Indian Drama. One has to be a "pess-optimist" in these conditions.

I have the advantage of spending plenty of time to consider the present and future of Indian drama since that is the only thing I do when I am not writing plays. Unfortunately, the advantage has turned out to be a doubtful one. I am too overwhelmed with ideas to be able to chase particular ones. In one of his novels Thomas Hardy speaks of a dog which so faithfully followed his master's flock that

when the latter, on one occasion, fell over a cliff the dog also followed! 'That's the fate', comments Hardy, 'of thinkers who pursue an idea too faithfully.' Perhaps the present article shows my doing just so.

Here, however, let me attempt to follow only three ideas. The first is that a 'Professional' Theatre should be brought into existence as early as possible. This does not mean that what we, in India, know as professional theatre and what exists in some linguistic regions under that name, should be encouraged or revived. A time has come when, in the interests of the future of our Theatre, we must clearly distinguish the professional from the commercial theatre. Our so-called 'Professional Theatre' is commercial theatre pure and simple. The one purpose, as in the case of films, is to collect the maximum returns for a minimum investment. If the commercial theatre is generally on the decline in various parts of the country it is just because there are not as easy profits as in the case of films. Usually, the commercial theatre has one thing to contribute to the progress of the Theatre. It not only helps to maintain an audience in existence but often-times it brings into existence a growing theatre-going public. But even this is no advantage in the present circumstances, for the development of a modern Indian Theatre.

For one thing, these commercial ventures are usually in the hands of persons to whom 'Modern Indian Theatre' has no meaning. For another, because of the profit motives, these ventures play on the safe side by descending, if necessary, to the standards of an undefined and untutored audience. Thirdly, except in rare instances, talented artists do not find a steady place here as they would mean a cut in the profits.

Even part from all these considerations, taking India as a whole, there is practically no commercial theatre except in Calcutta or in Bombay and Poona. In other places wherever there is any, it is hardly worth any consideration from the point of view of the quality of either the production or the audience. Leave alone modernity, it is not even as ostentatiously false as an Indian film. It is for this reason that a professional theatre, in the real sense of the word, is essential in the interests of the future of our Theatre.

Throughout India there is another Theatre, not organized, known as the Amateur Theatre. Here we find new writers, new producers, new actors though there is no such thing yet as a new audience. Those who are engaged in this theatre are fired with enthusiasm, imbued with a sense of modernity and aspiring for a better future. In everything but the final execution, Theatre is not only a passion but a profession to this class of *soi-dissant* amateurs. They take every opportunity of knowing what goes on in the theatre outside India, they study historically their own traditional theatre, they train themselves in the Theatre Arts and they are not afraid to learn by their mistakes. This theatre is the core of the real professional theatre of the future. Today its activities are purposeless, the efforts sporadic and the achievements unnoticed and un-assessed.

It is a pity that in spite of all-India institutions like the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Natya Sangh (Theatre Centre), India, very little — practically nothing is being done to establish such a 'Professional Theatre' in all the linguistic regions of the country. Oftentimes, substantial funds are frittered away for superficial purposes like buying 'modern' equipment or for Government propaganda (called publicity). Let us first have a modern theatre before we think of modern equipment. No equipment by itself can ever help us in bringing into existence a modern and growing audience. Films and circuses are doing what a cultural medium like theatre need not do.

By establishment of a 'Professional' theatre it is not intended to suggest that some or most of the existing thousands and thousands of amateur groups should be subsidised into permanent groups of paid artists; nor is it suggested that the Akademis or the Natya Sanghas should maintain a troupe or troupes of their own. What is worth encouraging in the amateurs group is their enthusiasm, particularly the spirit of dedication among them. Most of them have the talent but few of them know the art. The first thing to be done is to train a select few in the art of Dramatics. At present we have a National School of Drama in Delhi and training is supposed to be provided in one or two Universities among the eighty or so Universities in this vast land. But what is the impact of this training on the Indian amateur theatre

world! Practically nil. As a matter of fact most of the amateurs do not realise the necessity of such a training nor do they not know that training is provided at half-a-dozen centres. The problem of language, apart from other considerations as well, makes the Delhi School a limited institution. Even as it is, the good results of training are exhibited mostly to the official world of Delhi and occasionally to a select audience in one or two cities. The general audience outside has no knowledge of the School. Some cities might have witnessed occasionally, the second-rate productions of a visting foreign troupe not knowing that in their own country trained artists put up better ones. The dozen or so who are trained, after the training is completed, might find that they have plenty of time in their after-life to unlearn all that they have learnt.

In other words, good intentions and modest efforts lead ultimately to wastage. Professional theatre, as defined here, cannot be established unless the artists themselves are both trained and provided opportunities to put that training to constant use. There is nothing to prevent and everything to justify our Universities including training in Dramatics. Dramatic activity is not just a vulgar relaxation or an uncultured activity. From physical culture to the understanding of human nature, from phonetics to painting it includes the study of a number of subjects. If the regional Universities and the Delhi and other schools were to show their efforts on a planned basis to the Indian audience then both the need and the benefit of training would be realised. Not only that, amateur productions on the whole would be galvanized to better and still better quality.

An illustration to show why training at University level is required may not be out of place here. Between a commercial and an amateur theatre production usually there is a distinctive difference in the choice and the type of the play. That, however, does not always mean one is better than the other. On the other hand, the principle underlying the selection seems to be the same in both the cases, viz. entertainment of the audience. Of course, the element of entertainment is an essential part of drama. Even in our tradition Bharata — the author of *Natya-sastra* has said that a play should be so entertaining as to drive away

sleep from the eyes of an audience (*nidrā-vinodanam*). But no expert of dramatics, no thinking lover of the Theatre does ever admit that that is the only element of a play. A good play must also be good literature, good enough to acquaint us with the ways of the world (*Loka-charita*). To recognise a good play not only has one to be an expert on Theatre but also a literary critic. The absence of this qualification in the amateur theatre has been responsible for the absence of good plays. A critical faculty is more likely to be cultivated at the University level.

The third and the last idea I would like to chase here is the education of audiences. The mention of such an idea may sound presumptuous if not actually foolhardy. In these days of democracy the audiences, like the electorates, are the masters and even like political masters these also need no education. Nevertheless the fact remains that our theatrical arts have not progressed mainly, among other reasons, due to the audiences. Indian films are a glaring example of this. Perhaps there is nothing modern in this. Even Bharata speaks of a drama audience mostly consisting of 'women, children, and foolish persons' (*stree-bala-moorkha*). But, because of that Bharata does not ask us to cater to them. He advises us to cow them down by 'loud music of various instruments before the commencement of a performance'. Unfortunately but inevitably our modern commercial theatre would rather cater to the audience. For a different reason, our amateur theatre too seems to be inclined to do the same. Since amateur productions are sporadic and 'singular' (i.e. usually one and only one performance) every time it has to attract an audience. Except in half-a-dozen cities in India there is no such thing as an audience for the amateur theatre. And when on an occasion a few people come together to witness an amateur show they gather there for every other reason except seeing good Theatre. Which is good? Which is bad? There is not enough of the Theatre nor enough of an opportunity to compare and judge. Taste—what is significantly called *ruchi* in Sanskrit dramatics—is conspicuous by its absence.

Taste is as much a responsibility of the purveyor as of the consumer, and in the existing conditions of Indian Drama the initiative must

rest with the former. Provided he has the taste, two conditions will have to be brought about to help him do his duty; one, he must have the means to repeat the performances and two he must have sufficient number of small theatre-houses. Teacher-pupil ratio is as important here as in education in general. A smaller audience would inevitably be a select audience; a number of select audiences would as inevitably mean spread of education. Funds and grants may more usefully be spent in helping achieve this.

I do not know if these ideas of mine are capable of being carried out in practice. But my experience makes me believe they are worth consideration.

Adya Rangacharya (Sriranga). Born in 1904, Sriranga trained as a linguist at the University of London and began his career as a University teacher. After his teaching career, he turned to writing plays. He has to his credit 29 full-length and more than 47 one act plays in Kannada, the majority of which have been performed. Some of his plays have been translated into Hindi and other Indian languages and performed. He has been an actor-producer of plays and is founder-president of the Natya Sangh Mysore State. He was elected President of the Kannada Sahitya Sammelan in 1966 and received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for play-writing in 1963. He was also elected Fellow of the Akademi in 1947.